

August 2, 2006

Comments of David V. Keyes of the Hunters Branch Community  
At the Transit Oriented Development Public Hearing  
Fairfax County Government Center

My name is David Keyes. I live in the Hunters Branch community immediately south and east of the Vienna Metro station and appreciate the opportunity to present a few observations regarding Transit Oriented Development – not from an academic or theoretical perspective, but from a practical day-to-day view point. I hope some of them will resonate with our Planning Commissioners and others in attendance.

On many levels, life is good in Fairfax County. Fairfax County represents an employment center that is the envy of much of the nation. Our schools enjoy a reputation that other districts find difficult to match. We have a rich and harmonious diversity of cultures that enrich our communities and our lives.

But housing is tight. Affordable housing is even tighter and our teachers, firefighters and law enforcement personnel are being forced out of the communities they serve. Repeated failures of elected leaders to fund adequate roads and other transportation mechanisms have greatly contributed to the transportation gridlock through which we struggle each day as commuters from as far away as West Virginia creep through increasing congestion.

Next month it will be 20 years since my wife and I and our 4 children moved within the shadow of the Vienna Metro Station. During that period, we have watched the evolution of county policies toward housing density, zoning, public transportation, and other issues related to our burgeoning population. Through involvement in three citizens associations over the last 20 years, through participation in county sponsored groups and studies, and through the experience of the daily grind, I have come to focus on several issues that have to be addressed if we are to plan truly smart growth for higher density developments under the concept of Transit Oriented Development.

In the interest of time, I will limit my comments to five areas of concern:

1. Environmental protection,
2. The needs of residents surrounding transit hubs,
3. The impact of private roads,
4. The need for satellite parking, and
5. The impact of hybrid associations.

So, to my first point: environmental protection. Transit Oriented Development must begin with environmental considerations at publicly funded facilities. I look at the Vienna Metro station as the quintessential bad neighbor. It was allowed to be built without proper storm water management and thus pollutes and erodes both Hattmark Branch and Hunters Branch watersheds. County officials have told us that Oakton High School was also built without consideration of the storm water impact it created.

In addition to the pollutants carried by the uncontrolled runoff, the erosion it causes is a major impediment to pedestrian access to Metro facilities from communities to the southeast and southwest of the station.

Transit Oriented Development must include respect for the environment by Federal, state, and local governments and the quasi-governmental bodies they create. Fairfax County devotes considerable resources to the oversight of environmental issues surrounding private developers. At least the very same oversight must be given to development by government and quasi-governmental entities. I am astounded that this issue must even be addressed in today's day and age.

2. My second point: there needs to be better understanding of the needs of residents surrounding transit hubs. My community somewhat represents the bookends of adult life with some characterizing us as the newlyweds and the "nearly-deads." In my community, a medium-density and theoretically Transit-Oriented development, 41% of our households travel in two directions – one travels east using Metro and another travels by car to someplace else.

If our community were truly a Transit Oriented Development, our young families would have dedicated spaces for children to run and play. We would be able to walk – and not drive as we must now do – to day care, elder care, a grocery store, convenience retail, and other neighborhood services. For several years I have watched a young mother drive off in the early morning hours to drop young children at day care, then drive back to her residence to walk to Metro. Eliminating that and similar requirements should be among the well-thought-out goals for Transit Oriented Development.

In addition, we should not forget that mass transit is a magnet for the physically impaired. In our neighborhood we have requirements for physical and visually impaired individuals to utilize Metro. We need to accommodate the visually impaired, wheelchairs and baby strollers as we perform our daily migration to and from mass transit. But what was built?

Access to the Metro station from the southern walkways defies ADA standards: some walkways are too steep for wheel chair access and leave parents puffing as they push strollers. Other walkways are too uneven; others are too narrow; others are off-set in what may seem like an artsy sort of way that make them difficult to navigate for those with physical or visual impairment.

Winter expands the access problem to all pedestrian users. Instead of clearing walkways, Metro snowplows fill the walkways with snow and ice from the roadways forcing people into cars to gain more or less safe access to public transportation.

3. My third issue is the impact of private roads on Transit Oriented Development. Moderate to high-density development must maximize the opportunity for users of mass transit to gain access to transit locations by means other than single occupant vehicles. In our neighborhood, those means must include safe pedestrian access, bicycle access,

skater access, handicapped access, and commuter bus access. Pedestrians must be safe from motor vehicles and from bicyclists who behave like the juiced up participants in European bicycle races. Cyclists and skaters must be safe from motor vehicles. The free flow of traffic depends on roadways free from pedestrian, bicycle, and skater traffic.

Too often the county steers developers to build private roadways. In our community, these are intentionally too narrow to meet state standards. Buses cannot use such roads because they are private; motor vehicles and bicycles cannot safely co-exist on such narrow roadways; and walkways are not sufficiently wide for pedestrians, the handicapped, parents with strollers, bicyclists, and skaters. I have yet to see transit oriented development that adequately addresses the competing interests of all user groups. Even worse, I watched as the county shied away from connecting the state owned and maintained roadway called Circle Woods Drive to Vaden and Saintsbury Drives at the Vienna Metro station, thus supplanting land that could have been used for dedicated bicycle/skater paths.

Fairfax County police will not enforce traffic laws on private roads, even when asked to do so by the directors of homeowner associations. Only accidents that involve serious bodily injury, drunk driving, or reckless driving will be investigated. Indeed, other than criminal activity, it is very difficult to get police response to misuse of roadways or other non-criminal problems. This would not be the case on publicly-owned roadways.

4. Fourth, Transit Oriented Development must address the failed promise of need for satellite parking for Metro stations. In 1986 when Five Oaks Road was connected to Saintsbury Drive, the county promised that outlying parking lots would be created to gather long distance commuters into buses for transportation to Metro stations. Instead, two high-rise parking buildings have quadrupled the number of cars at the station. Kate Hanley's 1998 promise to the community that no additional multi-story parking would be build is now at odds with the fast-paced effort to build yet a third such four-story structure directly overshadowing two-story town homes.

The crucial first quarter-mile ring from the Metro platform into the surrounding Transit Oriented Development in our community is increasingly consumed by high-rise parking structures. Instead of Transit Oriented Development, that is single occupant vehicle development!

I have to ask: where are the satellite parking lots? And where are courageous public leaders to see them funded and built? To answer my own questions, it appears to me that we are addressing county transportation needs neighborhood by neighborhood rather than in support of a broader vision.

In Transit Oriented Development, close in residents – perhaps in a one-mile radius – need small community electric or natural gas powered feeder buses to Metro rather than the congestion of more parkers at Metro stations. Fairfax City leads the way with its Cue Bus system at the Vienna Metro. Sadly, the Town of Vienna does not provide a similar service.

5. Fifth, and finally, Transit Oriented Development needs to better address the issues created by hybrid associations. In our community, there are currently 3, and soon to be 4 homeowner associations. Each of these is subordinate to a Master Association. The majority vote in the Master Association is controlled by a fifth group – the commercial interests represented by a large apartment complex and a business building. We have been blessed with wonderful corporate neighbors – but their needs diverge from our residential needs. Frictions try patience on both sides. Multi-use, Transit Oriented Development must find a more equitable way to address master associations and cost sharing proffers in which residents have had no say.

This concludes my remarks. Thank you once again to participate in this panel.